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ABSTRACT

The research project described in this paper represents an effort to consider family literacy as an evolving and problematic issue and to study participants' resistance to or misunderstanding of program goals. The project began as an intervention designed to address the increasing number of low-income children entering school without fundamental preliteracy skills. The main objectives initially were to train undergraduate students through an early literacy/biliteracy instruction course to tutor low-income parents in storybook reading strategies with their children and to teach parents from publicly funded preschools to interact with their children to enhance language development and prereading abilities. Fifty undergraduates participated as tutors, and over 180 Latino families with preschool children participated over 3 years. Tutors gave families instruction in scaffolded questioning strategies while reading or looking at storybooks with children. In the second and third years, the program evolved by adding evaluation features and providing books for participants. Parents were also encouraged to discuss family literacy in group sessions and to create their own goals and materials. Results for the first year were only marginally successful, and the attrition rate was high. Greatly improved retention and unsolicited enrollment figures showed that parents responded much more positively to the restructured program of the second and third years. They were particularly appreciative of the group approach. (SLD)

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Problematizing family literacy: lessons learned from a community-based tutorial program for low-income Latino families

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Family Literacy: Whose construction?

National concern with widespread lack of reading and writing skills has led to an increase in the number, variety and scope of family literacy programs across the United States. The National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) estimates that there are now over 1000 family literacy programs nationwide, and argues that this renewed emphasis on family literacy is the best long-term solution to the multiple problems associated with intergenerational cycles of poverty and lack of education (see Auerbach, 1995, Wagner 1994). However, it cannot be taken for granted that the displayed focus and intent of such programs will be comprehensible or acceptable to the population they are designed to serve. Programs which are overtly (or covertly) "catch-up" must contend with the public impression that they are perpetuating the very deficit model which they often claim to be rejecting. Moreover, in practical terms, efforts to mainstream non-majority populations are frequently based on constructivist approaches which may initially be as new to prospective learners from other cultures as the content matter of the program. Such factors can contribute powerfully to the well-documented high attrition rates for family literacy initiatives.

Evolving research assumptions

This research project represents an effort to consider family literacy as an evolving and problematic issue: specifically, to engage with and respond to participants' resistance to or misunderstanding of program goals. The project began as an straightforward intervention-prevention initiative designed to address the increasing number of low-income children entering school without the fundamental preliteracy skills and language base necessary for them to benefit fully from literacy instruction. At the outset, the two main objectives of the program were 1) to train undergraduate students, through an Early Literacy/Biliteracy Instruction course sponsored by the UCSB Education Department, to tutor low-income parents in storybook reading strategies with their children; and 2) to teach parents from publicly-funded preschools to interact with their children with literacy materials in ways that would enhance children's language development and prereading abilities. That is, the program was based on the twin assumptions that the training strategies specified for both undergraduates and parents were optimally effective.

Initially, the literacy program prescribed for the families was a packaged educational product whose theoretical foundation was based on a review of current literature on parent-child literacy construction, specifically that relating to storybook reading (Morrow, O'Connor, & Smith, 1990; Teale & Sulzby, 1989; Valdez-Menchaca & Whitehurst, 1992). However, Year One results showing marginal success forced a reexamination of basic premises: program administrators became aware through a variety of participant responses that program goals were often seen as assimilationist and/or insensitive to non-mainstream literacy patterns. Following the incorporation of revised objectives and methods of delivery more consonant with existing family literacy needs and practices, results from Year Two and Year Three showed considerable improvement in parent retention, unsolicited enrollment and participant satisfaction.

Initial method of operation: "delivering" family literacy

1. Tutor training: Fifty undergraduates participated in the three-year program as tutors. They were recruited from a variety of majors and disciplines and were instructed through a continuing course run by the Educational Psychology Program of the UCSB Graduate School of Education and the Preprofessional Program. The course offered instruction in early literacy, biliteracy, and intergenerational literacy, together with ongoing support and guidance for tutors' practical work in the field. Tutors were taught to use a Tutors' Manual detailing maternal scaffolding strategies, and to record their observations.

2. Target population: One hundred and eighty Latino families with their preschool children participated in the project over three years. With few exceptions the parents were first-generation immigrants from Central and Southern Mexico and Central America. Families were almost all intact and in the great majority of cases one or both parents were working, usually at agricultural or service-level jobs. The average length of U.S. residence was six years and the average number of children per family was three. A majority of the parents reported as Spanish-monolingual, claiming "not to speak" English and preferring Spanish for tutorials. Parents' level of education ranged from no education at all to high-school *(secundaria)* (10% no education, 10% 1st grade, 10% second grade, 60% sixth grade, and 10% *secundaria*).

3. Tutorial training program: The training consisted of six weeks of tutorials (each session 30 - 45 minutes) conducted by trained undergraduate tutors at participants' homes or preschools, as preferred by the participants. Tutors gave instruction in the use of scaffolded questioning strategies while reading or looking at illustrated storybooks with participants' children. This instruction was based on a Vygotsky-Brunerian scaffolding model consisting of four questioning steps about narrative construction. The overall goal of the tutorial was for the parent to mentor the child's developing idea of story construction of narrative.

4. Data collection and assessment methods: Initial instruments used included screening surveys, self-report questionnaires on family literacy practices, weekly tutors' and administrators' reports and observations, and videotapes of parent-child literacy interaction. The Year One videotape data collection was designed on the basis of a pre- and post-test model in which interactional patterns of parents and children were evaluated before and after the series of tutorial sessions. Videotapes of parents reading or looking at books with their children using a standard children's storybook in Spanish were collected and evaluated according to an evaluation format based on the child's language analysis program.

Subsequent program adaptations: "recording" family literacy

Tutor training adaptations, Years Two and Three:

a) Tutors were given detailed guidance in establishing rapport and trust with families.

b) Tutors were instructed to monitor and respond positively to parents' literacy levels.

c) Recruitment of Spanish-speaking undergraduates, particularly native-speakers, was increased.

d) Orientation visits were made to preschools and homesites.

e) Participation and advice of preschool teachers, administrators and parents acting as liaisons was sought.

e) Role-play and study of video recordings of participating families was extensively used.

f) Tutors were required to keep interactive journals which were shared weekly in the group session.

Tutorial program adaptations, Years Two and Three:

a) Families were encouraged to participate as a group, using their own systems of rewards or recognition for children's literacy achievement.

b) Older siblings already in school were used as facilitators.

c) Books without text and other literacy-related materials were provided to those parents who had difficulty reading.

d) Parent-made books and written or dictated stories were used in preference to commercially-produced texts.

Data collection adaptations after Year One

a) Audiotapes and tape recorders were given to the parents late in Year One to record naturally-occurring instances of story-reading or story-telling between parents and children when their interaction was most relaxed. The objective was to ascertain whether parents were practicing literacy-enhancing techniques as instructed, and to discover other methods of family interaction involving stories.

b) Exit-interviews on program completion and interviews with non-completing participants were conducted by independent interviewers.

c) Compilations were made of parents' stated preferences for their own and their children's reading.

d) Parents created children's books and wrote and dictated stories for their children.

Outcomes: year 1

Generally, the Year One results were only marginally successful, and the attrition rate was high (over 40%).

Self-report questionnaires: 70% of the families reported 0 -5 children's books or other literacy materials in the home. 60% reported that they read or looked at books with their children for a duration of at least 15 minutes less than once a week.

Tutors' weekly reports: Parents were reported to have performed good to excellent on interactions based on identification and labeling (closed-ended questioning), fair on open-ended questioning techniques, and poor on reasoning and hypothesis-testing while using books with their children. Additionally, tutors reported on many occasions parents' unfamiliarity with the activity of book reading or book use with children, parents' infrequent use of verbal praise or positive affect, and children's frequent use of one-word or non-verbal response during storybook interaction.

Videotaped pre- and post-tests and audiotapes: Post-tests did not vary to a significant degree from pretests. Parents presented a consistent pattern of 1) a slow, firm "teacherly" reading monotone; 2) a generally inexpressive reading style; and 3) frequent unresponsiveness to child initiations. Parents and children were shown to demonstrate 1) an apparent lack of affect or enjoyment in the storybook interaction; and 2) a lack of physical or eye contact. Moreover, replication of the maternal scaffolding questioning techniques taught and modeled by tutors was rarely found in parents' audiotapes.

The results from the incremental Teaching/Learning Scale set up at the outset of the project indicate that most families initially measured and continued to measure from the middle to the low end of the scale. Little improvement, based on the above criteria, was noted either in tutors' weekly reports, pre- and post-tests, or audiotapes. It was readily apparent that in Year One parents had difficulty internalizing the initial storybook reading format based on mainstream scaffolding patterns. This difficulty caused them to drop out of the program, as was learned in later exit-interviews, and also discouraged others from enrolling.

Outcomes: years 2 and 3

Exit and drop-out questionnaires from Years Two and Three suggest that embarrassment and confusion about tutors' role and approach and lack of understanding of tutors' instructions were primary reasons for non-completion. Parents felt inadequate about their own reading skills, and were unsure what was required of them in a school system based on early educational practices very unlike their own experiences of school. Thus although the official stance and tone of the program and its tutorial framework attempted to avoid deficit assumptions, the rating and descriptive systems in place for on-going evaluation tended to demonstrate axiomatically low levels of achievement. In short, the failure was in the program measures, not the participants,

In Years Two and Three, parents were encouraged to discuss family literacy in group sessions, and to initiate and to create their own goals, literacy materials, interactive instructional methods, parent-child scaffolding structures, and evaluation/reward systems for successful program completion. Greatly improved retention and unsolicited enrollment figures from these

two years (90%) showed definitively that parents responded much more positively to the restructured program, reflective of content and procedures they themselves had chosen.

Conclusion and recommendations: resolving problems together

The program concluded with a series of literacy conferences, interaction with schools and libraries, organized community literacy events, fund raising for literacy-related donations and systematic outreach to other families in the immigrant community, all of which were initiated by participating parents. Such satisfactory program results confirmed the appropriateness of the program revisions adopted after the first year. In the light of this overwhelming community response following a faltering start, the researchers recommend that family literacy programs should pose issues of mainstream literacy acquisition as problems to be resolved in collaboration with individual families and communities, rather than attempt to offer ready-made remedies for culturally different literacy practices assumed to be deficit. We hope that the impact of such research will be to extend the definition of family literacy and to frame it more securely within the context of learners' lives and experiences.

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